

Accident at Mill

Drawer 3

Youth - Indiana

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Abraham Lincoln before 1860

Accident at Gordon's Mill

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

An Interrupted Sentence

No feature of his backwoods life pleased Abe so well as going to mill. It released him from a day's work in the woods, besides affording him a much desired opportunity to watch the movement of the mill's primitive and cumbersome machinery. It was on many of these trips that David Turnham accompanied him. In later years Mr. Lincoln related the following reminiscence of his experience as a miller in Indiana. One day, taking a bag of corn, he mounted the old flea-bitten gray mare and rode leisurely to Gordon's mill. Arriving somewhat late, his turn did not come till almost sundown. In obedience to the usual custom requiring each man to furnish his own power he hitched the old mare to the arm, and as the animal moved around, the machinery responded with equal speed. Abe was mounted on the arm, and at frequent intervals made use of his whip to urge the animal on to better speed. With a careless "Get up, you old hussy," he applied the lash at each revolution of the arm. In the midst of the exclamation, or just as half of it had escaped through his teeth, the old jade, resenting the continued use of the goad, elevated her shoeless hoof and, striking the young engineer in the forehead, sent him sprawling to the earth. Miller Gordon hurried in, picked up the bleeding, senseless boy, whom he took for dead, and at once sent for his father. Old Thomas Lincoln came—came as soon as embodied listlessness could move—loaded the lifeless boy in a wagon and drove home. Abe lay unconscious all night, but towards break of day the attendants noticed signs of returning consciousness. The blood beginning to flow normally, his tongue struggled to loose itself, his frame jerked for an instant, and he awoke, blurting out the words, "*you old hussy!*" or the latter half of the sentence interrupted by the mare's heel at the mill.

Mr. Lincoln considered this one of the remarkable incidents of his life. He often referred to it, and we had many discussions in our law office over the psychological phenomena involved in the operation. Without expressing my own views I may say that his idea was that the latter half of the expression, "Get up, you old hussy," was cut off by a suspension of the normal flow of his mental energy, and that as soon as life's forces returned he unconsciously ended the sentence; or, as he in plainer figure put it: "Just

before I struck the old mare my will through the mind had set the muscles of my tongue to utter the expression, and when her heels came in contact with my head the whole thing stopped half-cooked, as it were, and was only fired off when mental energy or force returned.''

Herndon's Lincoln, William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, Vol. I, page 50.

Influences and Impressions

The only outside influence which directed and stimulated him in these ambitions was that coming first from his mother, then from his stepmother. These two women, both of them of unusual earnestness and sweetness of spirit, were one or the other of them at his side throughout his youth and young manhood. The ideal they held before him was the simple ideal of the early American, that if a boy is upright and industrious he may aspire to any place within the gift of the country. The boy's instinct told him they were right. Everything he read confirmed their teachings, and he cultivated, in every way open to him, his passion to know and be something. His zeal in study, his ambition to excel made their impression on his acquaintances. Even then they pointed him out as a boy who would "make something" of himself. In 1865, thirty-five years after he left Gentryville, Wm. H. Herndon, for many years a law partner of Lincoln, anxious to save all that was known of Lincoln in Indiana, went among his old associates, and with a sincerity and thoroughness worthy of grateful respect, interviewed them. At that time there were still living numbers of the people with whom Lincoln had been brought up. They all remembered something of him. It is curious to note that all these people tell of his doing something different from what other boys did, something sufficiently superior to have made a keen impression upon them. In almost every case each person had his own special reason for admiring Lincoln. A facility in making rhymes and writing essays was the admiration of many, who considered it the more remarkable because "essays and poetry were not taught in school." . . .

Many others were struck by the clever application he made of this gift for expression. At one period he was employed as a "hand" by a farmer who treated him unfairly. Lincoln took a revenge unheard of in Gentryville. He wrote doggerel rhymes about his employer's nose—a long and crooked feature about which

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THE ACCIDENT AT THE MILL

The story of Lincoln's youth which has the most interesting sequel is related about an accident at a mill when he was but nine years old. The episode as recorded by Lincoln himself in the autobiographical sketch prepared for John Lock Scripps in 1860, told in the third person, is as follows: "In his tenth year he was kicked by a horse and apparently killed for a time." The incident has been enlarged upon by several biographers and of course has lost nothing of human interest in the telling.

Holland, whose biography was published in 1864, was under the impression that Abraham had to go fifty miles to get the family corn ground. But that would be a long trip for a nine year old boy, especially so if he had to travel fifty miles each way. Coffin, another biographer who visited the Indiana country some years after Lincoln's death and apparently made some inquiries about certain incidents which occurred there, was under the impression that the mill where the accident occurred was fifteen miles from the Lincoln home or thirty miles for the round trip.

Fifteen miles is about the distance to Hoffman's Mill on Anderson River near New Boston on the Spencer-Perry County Line ten miles from Troy. This mill was built in 1812 by George H. Hoffman and operated later by his son Harrison, a friend of Lincoln and still later by Harrison's son, Riley Hoffman. Henry Brooner, a playmate of Abraham Lincoln stated "I often went with Lincoln to Hoffman's mill on Anderson River." As early as 1827 there was a well-kept road from Hoffman's Mill to Fredonia as recorded in the Perry County Court House.

The Hoffman mill, however, was operated by water power and while it is likely the Lincoln's patronized it, the story so often recorded, definitely states the place where the accident occurred was a horsepower mill. The accident more likely occurred at Noah Gordon's mill which was but two miles from the Lincoln's. In fact, the Gordon's were neighbors of the Lincoln's which makes the picture of a small lad riding a horse to a mill a short distance away, seem more reasonable. When Tom Lincoln's nine year old boy arrived on that particular day he had to wait his turn and the horse mills were slow affairs indeed. A boy companion who used to accompany Lincoln to Gordon's said Lincoln often remarked that "his dog could eat the meal as fast as the mill could grind it."

Not only was the customer obliged to furnish the horse power but also he must attend to the driving of the horse. A long beam was fastened to the upper mill stone, the horse hitched to the end of the beam then round and round the animal was driven until the grinding was completed. On the day the accident occurred Abraham is said to have arrived rather late and when his turn came he was determined to make a quick job of it by hurrying the horse. Apparently the boy by the use of a whip was trying to stimulate the horse to move more rapidly. The animal retaliated with her hind feet which knocked him unconscious:

Opinions as to just how long Lincoln remained in an unconscious state also vary. Holland apparently felt it was but a short time. Herndon in the Lamon letters notes the reviving of his senses "that night, say about midnight," but nine years later his book states; "Abe lay unconscious all night, but towards break of day the attendants noted signs of returning consciousness." The extension of the time element in the story makes the sequel to this accident of much more interest which may possibly account for the discrepancy.

Just here the details of the story again differ to suit the taste and imagination of the author telling the story. Holland in 1865 stated that "after Abraham had fastened his mare to the long beam, and was following her closely upon her rounds, when urging her with a switch and 'clucking' to her in the usual way, he received a kick from her which prostrated him and made him insensible. With the first instant of returning consciousness he finished the cluck, which he had commenced when he received the kick."

Herndon enlarges upon the aftermath of this experience in a letter he wrote to Lamon on March 6, 1870. Although he had read the Holland version of the story he states that Abe was addressing some rather harsh language to the horse and was kicked just as he had uttered the first part of the command "Get up, you lazy old devil," and after he had come to, the latter part of the expression was spoken. In Herndon's own book published in 1889 he claims Lincoln used the term, "Get up, you old hussy."

The most interesting variation in the two Herndon narratives is his report of how he and Mr. Lincoln used to speculate on the incident. In 1870 Herndon wrote: "We came to the conclusion—I being somewhat of a psychologist as well as physiologist—he aiding me and I him, that the mental energy, force, had been flashed by the will on the nerves and thence on the muscles and that energy, force or power had fixed the muscles in the exact shape, or form, or attitude, or position, to utter those words; that the kick shocked him, checked momentarily the action of muscles; and that so soon as that check was removed or counteracted by a returning flow of life and energy, force, and power in their proper channels, that the muscles fired off, as it were functioned as the nervous energy flashed there by the will through the nerves—acted automatically under a power in repose. This seemed to us to be the legitimate conclusion of things."

Herndon's explanation of it later on in his book was much abbreviated, he said, "Without expressing my own views I may say that his (Lincoln's) idea of it was that the latter half of the expression, 'Get up, you old hussy,' was cut off by a suspension of the normal flow of his mental energy, and that as soon as life's forces returned he unconsciously ended the sentence, or as he in a plainer figure put it: 'Just before I struck the old mare my will through the mind had set the muscles of my tongue to utter the expression, and when her heels came in contact with my head the whole thing stopped half-cocked, as it were, and was only fired off when mental energy or force returned.'"

Beveridge in his volume on Lincoln used quite freely the Herndon sources but fails to call attention to the accident given in such detail by Herndon. This statement Beveridge allows to cover the gristmill experiences: "When Abraham was old enough, he was sent to the mill with a bag of corn, and these journeys left upon his mind the most pleasing recollections of his boyhood."

Regardless of the confusion as to place, what Lincoln said, how long he was unconscious, and what he later thought about the peculiar incident, it is worthy of notice that he was but nine years old when the episode occurred. Whether it was before or after his mother's death in October, 1818, it would seem quite important whether he received the tender ministrations of a mother or no more attention than an eleven year old sister and his father could give him. The fact that he mentions the episode in his brief autobiographical sketch is sufficient evidence that it was one of the memorable incidents of his boyhood.

Did A Kick In The Head By A Horse Help Push Lincoln Forward? A Psychiatrist Believes So

By The Associated Press

NEW YORK, May 24.—A kick in the head by a horse apparently fractured Abraham Lincoln's skull in boyhood, causing permanent brain injuries.

The injuries may have partly shaped his personality, and indirectly affected his career.

This new viewpoint on Lincoln comes from a psychiatrist, Dr. Edward J. Kempf of Wading River, N. Y., writing in the A.M.A. Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry.

The fracture affected Lincoln's eyes, causing double vision and making him neurotic, Dr. Kempf suggests. It could have caused a tendency to sink into dull, melancholy blues whenever Lincoln's mind was not being stimulated.



Abraham Lincoln
The scar doesn't show

Fighting Back?

To fight back, Lincoln perhaps strove to keep mentally alert. His passion for justice and love of humor could have been ways of doing this, Dr. Kempf writes.

Some of his clues came from a study of Lincoln's photographs and from a life mask made in 1860.

The mask shows an unusual depression in the forehead, right over the left eye. Dr. Kempf thought it might mean a skull fracture. He looked for evidence of such a serious accident, and found it when Lincoln was 10 years old.

"He was driving an unshod horse hitched in a circular mill for grinding corn or sugar cane; and, growing impatient of her slow pace, he shouted, 'Get up, you hussy,' and gave her a whack with a stick. She kicked back, hitting him in the forehead.

Was Believed Dead

"He was knocked unconscious for many hours, and was thought for a time to be dead. He seems to have recovered without apparent serious after-effects, since he received no special medical attention for the head injury, the doctor living many miles away."

But brain hemorrhages and blood clots from the blow could have left permanent damage, Dr. Kempf says.

Lincoln's left eye was weakened. It would turn upward, showing more white than usual in the eyeball. It gave him a slightly staring effect. It caused double vision, which in turn brought headaches, nausea, indigestion and depression.

This was an organic neurosis, Dr. Kempf suggests. This type of eye trouble can set off an emotional conflict or neurosis, and the emotions can make the eye trouble worse, in a vicious circle.

Other Signs Cited

The psychiatrist cites other possible signs of brain injury in weakness of some face muscles, especially on the left side.

Lincoln, he says, would repeatedly lapse into a state of mental detachment, with a dull, sad, melancholy look. Then, when

he was stimulated by something someone said or did, his expression would change quickly to animated interest, and he would often smile or laugh.

A certain type of brain injury could explain this tendency, Dr. Kempf says.

A person who has it would, in order to keep alert, have to be involved or keep involved in "emotionally stimulating situations by cultivating special stimulating interests and objectives, such as a passion for legal justice for all people."

"Lincoln did just this, as a humorist seeking happiness and as a humanist seeking justice, in an endless fight to overcome the tendency to lapse into a rut of sad, gloomy, suicidal preoccupations."

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